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RECENT PROGRESS IN TENEMENT-HOUSE REFORM

The chief mile-stones which mark the progress of tenement-house reform during the years 1902 and 1903 are the enactment of a tenement-house ordinance in Chicago, the enactment of a tenement-house law for cities of the second class in Pennsylvania, the appointment of tenement-house commissions in the State of New Jersey and in the city of Boston, the successful operation of the New York Tenement-House Law for cities of the first class in New York, and its enforcement in the largest city of that State by a special city department known as the Tenement-House Department, which came into existence on January 1, 1902.

In Philadelphia, a citizens' investigation of conditions has been established on a firm basis, and an important change in the law and its enforcement is sure to result. In Cleveland, a similar citizens' movement is well under way, and a new law, based on the New York act, is being framed. Similar movements are on foot in Washington, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Kansas City, as well as in some of the smaller cities of the State of New York. All these movements testify to the public interest on this important subject, and to the extent to which that interest has been increasing.

It is suggestive also to note the different initiatives on which these movements have been started and the different needs to which they are directed, as illustrating their general character, and as also illustrating the practical American trait of adapting the means to the end. The Chicago movement, like that which culminated in the enactment of the New York law, was in its inception a philanthropic movement. It was started by the City Homes Association, and it resulted in the passage of a new city ordinance. The New Jersey movement, on the other hand, had its initiative with the governor of the State, the Honorable Franklin Murphy, of Newark, who, on his own motion, brought the subject before the legislature and secured the appointment of the present State commission. That commission has not yet made its report,¹ but it is expected to recommend a permanent State tenement commission to execute a State law. The Boston movement was initiated by social reformers, but took its present

¹Since this article was written the report has been made and its recommendations urged upon the legislature by a special message from the governor.—Ed.

form at the instance of Boston's enlightened mayor, Mr. Patrick Collins, who has just been re-elected by an overwhelming majority for a second term, and while its report has not yet been made, it is generally understood that it will be directed towards amendment of State law, and will not recommend any permanent tenement department for city or State. The non-political character of this national movement for better housing conditions is further illustrated by the fact that the governor of New Jersey and the mayor of Boston belong to different political parties.

The housing evils, to remedy which the movement is directed, are, in New Jersey and in Boston, as in New York, chiefly the evils of the taller tenement,—lack of light and air. Those in Washington, Philadelphia, and measurably in Boston too, are quite as much slum conditions in the back alleys, a form of city development which does not exist in New York.

The most instructive advances of the past two years in the practical operation of tenement reform, however, relate to the workings of the New York law and to the experience of the New York Tenement-House Department, charged with the enforcement of that law in the great city of New York. It is with these subjects that I am most familiar, and it is of these subjects that I propose mainly to treat in this article.

More than two years have now elapsed since the New York law went into effect, and since that time its enforcement in the largest city of that State has, under Mayor Low's appointment, been in the hands of its framers. During that period there have been two sessions of the legislature, at each of which the provisions of this law have been an important issue. Numerous amendments have been proposed, all more or less hostile to the new law. The contest has been a bitter one from start to finish. When the new law was introduced in 1901 it aroused strong opposition in the building trades and among owners of unreformed tenement houses, and an effort was made at that time to defeat it. Failing in this, the attack was renewed in 1902 and again in 1903. The main sources of opposition in these two years were certain building interests in Brooklyn, and the owners of the old houses in Manhattan. A fierce and bitter campaign was waged during both sessions of the legislature, and had it not been for strong public opinion, voiced by the press and supported by Governor Odell and the city adminis-

tration, the cause of tenement-house reform might have been lost. No amendments, however, were adopted except those sanctioned by its friends and introduced at their instance.

The enactment of this new law making radical changes in the type of future tenements, involving so much structural alteration in old tenements, and concentrating the enforcement of the new law, in the city of New York, in a new and separate city department, was undoubtedly unexpected by tenement owners and tenement builders. Up to the time when the New York State Commission of 1900 presented its report to the legislature, they had seemed indifferent. They had practically ignored the opportunity urged upon them by the commission, and availed of by many other interests, of appearing at its public sessions and of stating their views and desires. They did not attend any legislative hearing in large numbers. It was not until the bill had passed both houses of the legislature that they made their attitude known. On the part of larger building and real estate interests, that attitude was one of silent doubt—silent because many of them earnestly desired to improve the housing conditions of the working classes, and hesitated to oppose the recommendations of the commission, which included many of their own number, and silent, too, because both the governor and legislature were known to be favorable to the law, and opposition, particularly from interested sources, was not likely to be effective. On the part of smaller property owners and speculative builders that attitude was one of loud-voiced protest, which vainly demanded a veto from the governor.

The new law, with its larger court areas, changed the type of tenement. It was experimental in this respect to an unusual degree. Moreover, in making the new tenement more light, more sanitary, and more fireproof, it made it more expensive. Would this required change in form suit the desires of tenants, who had been so long habituated to the darkness and closeness of the dumb-bell as to perhaps shun more light and ventilation? Would not its improved construction increase its cost so as to make the new tenement commercially unprofitable, and thus not only stop building, but depreciate the value of land which would remain unoccupied because building had ceased? Would not the compulsory alteration of old tenements involve large expense to their owners without any corresponding compensation in added income?

These were questions which from the point of view of land-owner and builder, judging the law in reference to its immediate effect on their own personal interests, and without regard either to the future value of their own property or to the present and future welfare of the tenement dwellers and the community at large, might have been answered in the affirmative. Even those who were quite ready to consider the welfare of the tenant class might hesitate on that account to risk the possibly higher rental for the certainty of better housing conditions.

These questions, so far as they relate to new-law tenements, have now been answered. All doubts have been removed. The new-law tenement stands successful, alike from the point of view of builder and tenant. The extent to which this practical solution has proceeded is best appreciated when it is borne in mind that during the year 1902 five hundred and forty-three new tenement houses were built, at an estimated cost of over \$20,000,000, and during the first half of 1903 plans were filed for a still larger number,—six hundred and ninety-nine,—at an estimated cost of \$20,-837,270.

The new-law houses have been an unqualified success. Builders and owners who were at first bitterly opposed to the law are now outspoken in its approval, and many of them state that the new houses are more remunerative than the old ones. The demand for the new accommodations on the part of the tenants has been overwhelming. Not only have the apartments been rented in many cases before the buildings have been completed, but in some instances the apartments have been rented from the plans before the buildings were even started. Such a thing has never before been known to occur in the tenement districts.

On the lower East Side, where the new houses have been built in greatest number, it is a Sunday diversion of the people to take their families and friends to see them and to wonder at and admire the light rooms, the bath-tubs, and the other improvements. The rents in the new buildings are slightly higher than the rents in houses recently erected under the old law in similar neighborhoods, and rightly so because they give better accommodation. Moreover, there is a general rise in rents throughout the city, which has no relation to the new tenement law or to the new-law house; it is due to a variety of causes, among which may be noted the general

increase of prices and cost of living, and the displacement of large numbers of the population by the destruction of many houses for extensive public improvements. The approach for the Delancey Street bridge on the lower East Side alone displaced ten thousand people. It is, of course, obvious that until the supply of new-law houses in certain neighborhoods equals the demand, rents will tend to rise. It would be a sorrowful comment on the intelligence of the working people if they were not willing to pay a little more for vastly improved living accommodations.

A statement of the main features of the new-law tenements and the difference between them and the types of houses permitted to be erected prior to 1901 is not inappropriate here. In the new-law houses every room is light, whereas in the previous "dumb-bell" type ten rooms out of every fourteen were dark or gloomy. Every room is well ventilated; in the dumb-bell the only rooms that had adequate ventilation were those which opened on the street or yard, and ten out of fourteen rooms were inadequately ventilated. The great improvement in ventilation was vividly impressed upon a recent observer, who noticed with amazement all the window shades blowing out of the front windows of a row of new-law houses, so great was the circulation of air in the rooms. To any one familiar with the heavy fetid air which prevailed in the old houses the contrast is striking.

The public halls are no longer dark, narrow, unventilated corridors, sixty feet long, but are compact, wide halls, with ample light and ventilation, with a large window to the outer air at each story.

In the new houses but 70 per cent. of the lot is occupied, instead of 75 per cent. as in the past. The height of a new house is now proportionate to the width of the street on which it is located, and cannot be higher than one and a half times that width. In the past there was no such limitation, and a tenement house might be built even ten stories high on a street but thirty feet in width. In the new houses the size of the yard is proportionate to the height of the building; in the past the yard was the same size, no matter how high the building. Now the yards must be thirteen feet deep where in the past they were but ten, while on corner lots they must be ten feet where before they need be but five. In place of air-shafts but twenty-eight inches wide, inclosed on all four sides, and without any means

of ventilation at the bottom, there are large courts not less than twelve and one-half feet wide and twenty-five feet long, with a large tunnel at the bottom, securing adequate ventilation and constant renewal of the air. No window now opens within six and one-half feet of a window opposite, and generally they are twelve and one-half feet away, and often twenty-five feet, instead of being but twenty-eight inches distant as in the past.

No room is now less than seventy square feet in area, and every apartment must contain at least one room of one hundred and twenty square feet in size. In the past many rooms were but sixty square feet in area; and often the only means of reaching one of the bedrooms was by passing through another bedroom. This is no longer permissible. Instead of water-closets located in the public halls and used by two families, each family now has its private water-closet, entirely within the apartment and therefore within its own control.

Cellar walls and floors are now required to be protected against dampness. Non-fireproof tenement houses can now be erected to a height of only six stories, instead of eight as formerly; fire-escapes must now be really adequate; instead of vertical ladders there must be substantial stairs, and the balconies must be at least three feet wide instead of two and one-half feet. No fire-escape may now be located in a court, but must be on the front or rear of the building. Instead of public halls and stairs so narrow that two persons could not easily pass each other, no public hall or stairs may be less than three feet wide, and where there are an unusual number of families in the building the stairs and halls must be increased in width proportionately. There are other important changes effected in the new houses, of greater or less degree of importance.

The following summarized statement will, however, indicate the more important ones in a readily apprehended form:

A SUMMARY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHANGES EFFECTED IN NEW TENEMENT HOUSES BY THE TENEMENT HOUSE ACT

The new tenement prior to 1901.

1. Dark rooms—10 out of 14.
2. Unventilated rooms—10 out of 14.
3. Public halls dark and narrow.

The new tenement after 1901.

1. All rooms light.
2. All rooms well ventilated.
3. Public halls light and ventilated.

The new tenement prior to 1901.

4. 75 per cent. of lot occupied.
5. No limit to height of buildings on narrow streets.
6. Yards of interior lots 10 feet deep.
7. Yards of corner lots 5 feet.
8. Air-shafts 28 inches wide.
9. Air-shafts with no means of ventilation at the bottom.
10. Air-shafts in the centre of building $2\frac{1}{3}$ feet wide.
11. Windows of rooms opening within 28 inches of windows in adjoining house.
12. Rooms with but 60 square feet of floor area.
13. No requirement for size of living rooms.
14. Access to other rooms and water-closets through bedrooms.
15. Water-closets used in common by two families located in public halls.
16. Cellar rooms permitted with ceilings only two feet above ground.
17. Cellar walls and floors not protected against dampness.
18. Non-fireproof tenements 8 stories high permitted.
19. Fire-escapes with vertical ladders permitted.
20. Fire-escape balconies 30 inches wide permitted.
21. Fire-escapes located in air-shafts.
22. Iron gratings in shafts permitted without ladders or stairs.
23. Public halls narrow.

The new tenement after 1901.

4. 70 per cent. of lot occupied.
5. Height limited to $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the width of street.
6. Yards of interior lots (6 story buildings) 13 feet, and 1 foot more for each additional story.
7. Yards of corner lots 10 feet.
8. Large courts 12 feet wide.
9. Courts with an intake or tunnel at the bottom renewing the air constantly.
10. Inner courts in the centre of building 24 feet wide.
11. No windows within $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet of another window and generally $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet apart and often 25 feet.
12. No room less than 70 square feet.
13. One room of 120 square feet in each apartment.
14. Sole access through bedrooms prohibited.
15. A private water-closet for each family entirely within its own apartment.
16. Ceilings of cellar living rooms to be $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet above ground.
17. Cellar walls and floors to be damp-proof.
18. Non-fireproof tenements limited to 6 stories.
19. Substantial stairs required for fire-escapes.
20. Fire-escape balconies required to be 3 feet wide.
21. Fire-escapes forbidden in shafts.
22. Iron gratings forbidden, and stairs required.
23. No public halls less than 3 feet wide, and to be increased with an increased number of families.

The new tenement prior to 1901.

- 24. Stairs narrow.
- 25. Stairs so steep as to injure the health of women.
- 26. Wooden stairs and non-fireproof halls in five story buildings.
- 27. Public halls not shut off from non-fireproof parts of the building.
- 28. Wooden tenement houses for six families permitted outside of fire limits.

The new tenement after 1901.

- 24. No stairs less than 3 feet and to be increased with an increased number of families.
- 25. No stairs with a rise of more than 8 inches.
- 26. Stairs and halls to be completely fireproof.
- 27. Public halls shut off from non-fireproof parts of building.
- 28. No wooden tenement house to be occupied by more than four families.

Of greater interest, however, though not of greater importance, in the development of the new type of tenement house, is the actual experience of the new Tenement-House Department in dealing with conditions as it found them and in the enforcement of the new law. Enforcement of the law, as respected new buildings, was a comparatively simple matter, involving mainly the application of fixed regulations to the new form which matter in the shape of iron, or bricks, or timber was to take in a new building. Its application, however, to existing conditions in old buildings, and to changing, in many respects, fixed habits on the part of both landlords and tenants involved the ever-varying human element, and presented difficulties and perplexities at every turn.

The first thing that the new department did was to make a careful examination of the old tenement houses in the city of New York. To state this fact involves but a sentence. To make this initial examination, however, occupied the force and energy of the department during many long months. It was the first time that any complete examination had ever been made. For the first time tenement conditions in New York City were known. New York has over eighty-three thousand tenement houses, which are occupied by nearly three million people, representing every nationality and every degree of social scale. These conditions, in many instances, have been found to be so bad as to be indescribable in print; vile privies and privy sinks; foul cellars full of rubbish, in many cases of garbage and decomposing fecal matter; dilapidated and dangerous stairs; plumbing pipes containing large holes emitting sewer

gas throughout the houses; rooms so dark that one cannot see the people in them; cellars occupied as sleeping-places; dangerous bakeries without proper protection in case of fire; pigs, goats, horses, and other animals kept in cellars; dangerous old fire-traps without fire-escapes; disease-breeding rags and junk stores in tenement houses; halls kept dark at night, endangering the lives and safety of the occupants; buildings without adequate water-supply,—the list might be added to almost indefinitely.

A new branch of the city government had to be organized, its machinery created, and a force of about four hundred employees trained, disciplined, and educated. The results of department action up to June 30, 1903, a period of eighteen months, are as follows:

Living accommodations for 16,768 families, or 83,840 persons, have been provided in sanitary, comfortable, and decent houses, each one of which has been built according to law; notorious evasion of and non-compliance with the laws has given place to their complete, uniform, and impartial enforcement; the evil of prostitution has been practically abolished in the tenement houses; 337,246 inspections have been made; 55,055 violations filed; 21,584 repairs made to plumbing; 13,617 water-closets cleaned; 11,611 accumulations of filth removed from cellars and other parts of such buildings; 13,732 ceilings cleaned; 15,364 walls cleaned; 10,060 unsafe wooden floors removed from fire-escapes and new iron floors substituted; 1701 fire-escapes erected on buildings that before were without this protection. The registration of 44,500 owners' names has been secured, thus fixing the responsibility for bad conditions in the tenements; contagious disease has been checked and prevented, and 32,825 citizens' complaints have been investigated and the conditions complained of remedied.

The existing tenement houses have been frequently and systematically inspected; foul cellars have had the accumulated filth of years removed; defective and unsanitary plumbing which had apparently existed for long periods has been remedied; houses unfit for human habitation have been vacated; hundreds of houses have been radically reconstructed and improved; light has been let into dark rooms; vile yard privies and privy sinks have been removed, and the whole sanitary condition of the city raised to a higher standard. The effect of this work is clearly reflected in the reduced death rate, which in 1902 was 18.70 in the thousand, as compared with 20 in

1901, and in 1903 has been reduced to 18.11. These percentages in themselves give no adequate conception of the change. It should be borne in mind that each change in the death-rate of one-thousandth in a population, say of three million five hundred thousand, means a difference of three thousand five hundred lives, and that each change in the decimal point of one-tenth of one-thousandth means a difference of three hundred and fifty lives. It must not be understood that the Tenement-House Department was the sole cause of this change. It was only one of the several contributing causes, but as it performs all the ordinary functions of a health department for the housing conditions of over two-thirds of New York's population, it is evident that its action was no inconsiderable factor in the entire result.

The attitude of tenement dwellers to the new department and, indeed, towards the city government is best illustrated by the character of the complaints received. During the first eleven months in which the department was dealing with citizens' complaints (I use these figures because I happen to have them accurately compiled and at hand) it received, in the borough of Manhattan alone, twenty-five thousand and eighteen citizens' complaints, and every one of these complaints was investigated.

That so large a number of complaints should be received in so short a period is a most encouraging indication of the fact that the great mass of the tenement-house dwellers desire better conditions, and that they only endure the conditions which they do endure because they are entirely helpless without the aid of the municipality.

The complaints represent almost every phase of tenement-house life; many are exceedingly amusing, others pathetic, and some are even tragic. The spelling of many of these letters is unique, as is the conception in many cases of the functions of the department. One apparently refined elderly woman called at the department upon one occasion, and, after having interviewed the complaint clerk, insisted upon seeing the Commissioner. She was highly indignant because she had reported that her apartment was overrun with fleas, and he had informed her that there was nothing that the department could do about it. It was impossible to make her understand that the removal of fleas from her particular apartment was not a proper municipal function. Other complaints asked the department to secure for them steam heat and similar conveniences. The range

of subjects covered by the complaints is practically unlimited. The department has been asked to prevent boys from throwing stones in the streets; its attention has been called to the presence of an insane woman in a building; it has been asked to stop the janitor from raising dust when he sweeps; to prevent tenants from shaking rugs out of windows; to stop noise in the neighborhood. It has been advised that some of the tenants in the tenement house are unclean and disorderly, and several complaints have alleged that the clothes-line on which the women hang their clothes are always full and there is no space.

It is very difficult to describe the conditions actually found by tenement inspectors in any general language. However full and complete such a description might be, couched in general terms it would convey no adequate impression. My own most vivid impressions have been obtained by a personal view. Next to this personal view, an actual description by an inspector of the particular things he has seen at a particular place is most graphic. As the former method is impracticable to the readers of this paper, I employ the second by including a few typical reports of inspectors, in precisely the form in which they were received by the Tenement Department.

"In November, 1902, I visited a five-story brick building, situated on East One Hundred and Ninth Street, and inhabited exclusively by poor Italians. On entering the building I was met at the first story by a woman who said she was the janitress of the place, and who asked me in broken English whom I wished to see. I explained to her the purpose of my visit and told her also that I was an inspector from the Tenement-House Department.

"Before I finished my answer, I noticed a big crowd of men, women, and children assembled around me and with great anxiety trying to find out my position. But all my explanations and the large conspicuous print on the hat band were too hard a subject for them to understand; so I tried to explain to them as much as I could the purpose of my business in their own language and began to insist upon inspecting the premises.

"As usual, I went down to the cellar, and while jumping from the last step of the stairs on what I supposed to be the cellar floor, I found myself bathing in a cold stream. My feet began strongly

to protest against taking a bath in November, and I had to resort to my torch in order to find my way back. When I threw the light and noticed the baskets, wooden boxes, and other articles floating on the surface the scene appeared like the remains of a wrecked ship floating on the surface of the sea.

"Notwithstanding this experience, I decided to find out the cause of this flood. A few good Italians offered me their services. They immediately brought down chairs and stones, and began to lay planks direct to the house drain, and there I found a large hole 3 by 6 inches; so that all the waste from the building, instead of being conveyed to the street sewer, remained in the cellar.

"I proceeded further with my inspection, and found that the condition in the public halls and in the apartments were not much better than those in the cellar. Every water-closet in the building was either broken or obstructed; every flushing apparatus was out of order; some flush tanks had no water at all, and from some the water was overflowing. The wooden wash-trays and the woodwork around the sinks in the apartments were so foul, rotten, and saturated from long usage that it was absolutely impossible for me to remain more than three minutes, on account of the stench that emitted therefrom.

"I reported violations against this building, and orders were issued immediately to the owner to remove the evils. The owner, on getting the orders, began to realize that the time had come when he had to do something. When I came around in a few weeks, to make a reinspection, it took me nearly five minutes to convince myself that I was in the same building I had originally inspected, and I only arrived at this conclusion by recognizing my Italian friends who had helped me to lay the planks in the cellar.

"They greeted me with great joy when I began to inspect the premises. I found that a new cast-iron drain had been provided, new water-closets installed, new sinks and wash-tubs of non-absorbent material had been furnished, and the walls and ceilings of the halls and apartments newly painted. In one apartment on the top floor I found a company of Italians around a table celebrating some feast. When they noticed me every one jumped to his feet to express his thanks, and I was invited to have dinner with them. I thanked them cordially for their hospitality and left the premises."

"It was a 'bad house'—that was the general verdict of the neighbors of a certain tenement house on Eighth Street. 'Inspector, can't you do something to rid us of those disorderly persons?' That was the appeal made to the inspector by the respectable people of the vicinity. This, among other things, is what the inspector found: On the fourth story there were nine small rooms, occupied mainly by dissolute men and women. While obscene jests and curses filled the air, two small girls, three and four years old, played on the hall floor. What those innocent ears and inquiring eyes heard and saw is horrible to contemplate.

"On the Sunday previous to the day of inspection a woman had been stabbed by a drunken man, and about two weeks before another woman had been slashed by an infuriated rival. Brawls were frequent, and the place was a menace to the safety of the neighborhood. Three cases of smallpox had occurred in the house within a comparatively short time. The machinery of the Tenement-House Department was set in motion, and the result was a quiet, orderly, clean house, where formerly existed a den, where physical and moral disease existed, to the danger of respectable and law-abiding people."

"The direction of the Department was directed to that tenement house on Tenth Avenue, near Fifty-second Street, by the recent existence of contagious disease. This tenement was extremely unsanitary and all urgent matters received the attention of the Department; such as a wet and filthy cellar, a defective earthenware house drain, and foul water-closets. Special importance attaches to this inspection, as it revealed the ghastly fact that a butcher-shop, located on the first story, had its refrigerator waste-pipe directly connected with the house drain—not even a trap intervening to intercept the entrance of sewer air into the refrigerator, and thereby partially prevent the contamination of the meat kept therein. This condition existed during six years prior to this inspection.

"During six long years meat contaminated by sewer air was sold in the neighborhood. It is needless to say that the Department immediately ordered the landlord to provide a properly trapped and sewer-connected sink, into which the refrigerator waste pipe would thereafter discharge, and to promptly abate the nuisance."

Marked as has been the progress of housing reform during the past two years on the scientific lines of acquiring precise knowl-

edge and applying definite remedies, it has been most marked in the awakening and development of public interest in this subject. Every one can recognize by his own experience the effect of his home surroundings on his own individual and family life, not merely on the utilitarian side of mere health, but on the social side of comfort and enjoyment, if such a differentiation is possible. Every one who sees the disease-bearing and comfortless housing conditions under which so many of the poorer classes live in our cities is therefore in a position to measure the evils of these conditions, and to foresee the menace of these evils not only to those who are forced to bear them, but to their more fortunate but adjacent neighbors.

No one who knows the discomfort (to use the mildest term) of these conditions can have it in his heart entirely to condemn the men and women who seek refuge from them in the saloon or almost anywhere that promises some light and room and cheer. Most of all do those who know them honor and respect the great body of our working classes, who, under such conditions, preserve their sobriety and self-respect, and safeguard their family life.

It is out of such knowledge, beginning to be so general on the part of the "well to do," that comes the present widespread desire to better such housing conditions. It is one of the directions in which altruism is expressing itself most forcibly. But it is not necessary to appeal solely to altruistic motives for remedial action. Self-preservation is a motive quite as cogent. The line of future progress in housing reform is to direct this desire, so general, and often so pathetic in its aimless expression, towards practical ends.

ROBERT W. DE FOREST,

Tenement-House Commissioner, New York City, 1902-1904.